U.S. Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

January 2018

# Potential Modifications to Land Use Plans Regarding Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation

## Scoping Report

The Bureau of Land Management's multiple-use mission is to sustain the health and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The Bureau accomplishes this by managing such activities as outdoor recreation, livestock grazing, mineral development, and energy production, and by conserving natural, historical, cultural, and other resources on public lands.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | Full Phrase |
|---|---|
| AIM | assessment, inventory, and monitoring (strategy) |
| ARMPA | approved resource management plan amendment |
| BLM | United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management |
| CFR | Code of Federal Regulations |
| DOI | United States Department of the Interior |
| EIS | environmental impact statement |
| FLPMA | Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 |
| GHMA | general habitat management area |
| HAF | habitat assessment framework |
| LUP | land use plan |
| LUPA | land use plan amendment |
| NEPA | National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 |
| NOI | Notice of Intent |
| NSO | no surface occupancy |
| NTT | Greater Sage-Grouse National Technical Team |
| PHMA | priority habitat management area |
| RDF | required design feature |
| RMP | resource management plan |
| RMPA | resource management plan amendment |
| ROW | right-of-way |
| SFA | sagebrush focal area |
| US | United States |
| USFWS | United States Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service |

# CHAPTER 1
# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

In September 2015, the United States (US) Department of Interior (DOI) and the US Department of Agriculture adopted amendments and revisions to 98 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and US Forest Service land use plans (LUPs) across eleven western states.[1] These LUPs addressed, in part, the Greater Sage-Grouse and its habitat. These plans govern the management of 67 million acres of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat on federal lands. Forest Service and BLM-administered lands account for more than half of the remaining Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

In September 2015, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that the Greater Sage-Grouse did not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. It based its decision on the conservation commitments and progress reflected in the federal LUP amendments (LUPAs) and revisions, as well as on other private, state, and federal conservation efforts.

The BLM is currently implementing the 2015 Greater Sage-Grouse plans, apart from the recommended withdrawal from locatable mineral entry within sagebrush focal areas (SFA); this proposed withdrawal was cancelled on October 11, 2017.

On March 31, 2017, the US District Court for the District of Nevada held that the BLM violated the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended, (NEPA) by failing to prepare a supplemental environmental impact statement (EIS) for the designation of sagebrush focal areas in the Nevada and Northeastern California Greater Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan (RMP) Amendment.

[1]The eleven states covered by the amendments and revisions are California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

In June 2017, the Secretary of the Interior issued Secretarial Order 3353, Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation and Cooperation with Western States. The purposes of the order are as follows:

- Enhance cooperation between the DOI and the 11 western states in managing and conserving the Greater Sage-Grouse and its habitat
- Support a partnership with clearly defined objectives and roles for federal and state entities responsible for Greater Sage-Grouse management and conservation, in order to sustain healthy species populations
- Establish a team to review the federal land management agencies' Greater Sage-Grouse plan amendments and revisions completed on or before September 2015

The recently established review team submitted the Report in Response to Secretarial Order 3353 to the Secretary of the Interior on August 4, 2017. The Secretary directed the BLM, in coordination with other DOI offices, to begin immediately implementing the short- and long-term recommendations in the report. The Secretary also directed the agency to continue collaborating with the states and stakeholders to improve compatibility between the 2015 federal Greater Sage-Grouse plans and other plans and programs at the state level.

Based on the Nevada District Court ruling and direction from Secretarial Order 3353, the BLM is considering the possibility of amending some, all, or none of the LUPs that were amended in 2014 and 2015. A Notice of Intent (NOI) published on October 11, 2017, initiated a 45-day scoping period. See **Section 1.3.1**, Notice of Intent, for more information.

## 1.2 Overview of the Scoping Process and Scoping Report

Public involvement is a vital and legally required component of the planning processes. Public involvement vests the public in the decision-making process and allows for full environmental disclosure. Guidance for implementing public involvement under NEPA is codified in 40 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) 1506.6, thereby ensuring that federal agencies make a diligent effort to involve the public in the NEPA process. Guidance for implementing public involvement during land use planning actions on public lands can be found in the BLM's Land Use Planning Handbook (H-1601-1) (BLM 2005).

Scoping is an early and open process that helps the BLM to determine the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action. Information collected during scoping may also be used to develop the alternatives to be addressed in a NEPA document.

In accordance with 43 CFR 1610.2(d), the BLM must document the public scoping results. Its land use planning guidance (BLM 2005) also requires the documentation of public involvement.

This scoping report summarizes the scoping process and the comments received during the formal scoping period.

## 1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE SCOPING PROCESS

As required by NEPA and its public involvement guidance, the BLM solicits comments from relevant agencies and the public, organizes, and analyzes all comments received. Then the agency evaluates the position statement of each comment and extracts the over-arching issue that will be addressed during the planning process. These issues define the scope of analysis for LUPs and are used to develop the project alternatives. All comment letters are posted on the project website for public review (https://goo.gl/2D5WTw).

### 1.3.1 Notice of Intent

As defined under NEPA, the scoping period began with the publication of the NOI in the *Federal Register* on October 11, 2017. The NOI was titled Notice of Intent to Amend Land Use Plans Regarding Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation and Prepare Associated Environmental Impact Statements or Environmental Assessments. The NOI acknowledged that Greater Sage-Grouse land management issues may warrant development of LUPAs.

During this period, the BLM sought public comments on whether all, some, or none of the 2015 Greater Sage-Grouse plans should be amended, what issues should be considered, and if plans should be completed at the state level rather than at the national level. In addition, the DOI Deputy Secretary has emphasized that input from state governors would weighed heavily when considering what changes should be made.

The official comment period ended on December 1, 2017. To account for delays in receiving submissions via the US Postal Service, comments received through December 6, 2017, are considered in this report.

The NOI accomplishes the following:

- Outlines the BLM's intention to consider the possibility of amending some, all, or none of the LUPs that were amended or revised in 2014 and 2015 on Greater Sage-Grouse conservation in the 11 states included in the plans (2015 Sage-Grouse Plans)
- Seeks comments on the SFA designation, mitigation standards, lek buffers, disturbance and density caps, habitat boundaries, and reversal of adaptive management responses when the BLM determines that resource conditions no longer warrant a response
- Seeks comments on state-specific issues, planning criteria, and the adequacy of Greater Sage-Grouse conservation measures in LUPs
- Does not preclude the BLM from addressing issues and inconsistencies through other means, including policy, training, or

plan maintenance, nor does it commit the BLM to amend some, all, or none of the 2015 Greater Sage-Grouse plans

### 1.3.2 Website

The BLM launched a national Greater Sage-Grouse conservation website as part of its efforts to maintain and restore Greater Sage-Grouse habitat on public lands. The site is intended to make it easy to learn how the BLM is working on maintaining and restoring Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. It includes background information related to government and BLM roles in Greater Sage-Grouse conservation. The website is https://www.blm.gov/programs/fish-and-wildlife/sage-grouse.

In addition to the national Greater Sage-Grouse conservation website, the BLM has a project website with information related to this potential planning effort. It includes background documents, information on public meetings, and contact information. The website is https://goo.gl/2D5WTw.

### 1.3.3 Public Scoping Open Houses

The BLM hosted 15 open houses in 11 western states. The purpose was to provide the public with opportunities to become involved, learn about the project and the planning process, meet the planning team members, and offer comments. BLM was represented in all scoping meetings, and where possible, representatives from state fish and game agencies also attended. The BLM sent personal invitations to state partners and local county leaders. The open houses were advertised via news releases and the project website. The locations of the open houses are provided in **Table 1-1**, below.

**Table 1-1**
**Scoping Open Houses in 2017**

| Location | Venue | | Date | Number of Attendees |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | ***California*** | | |
| Alturas, California | Niles Hotel | 5:00–7:00 p.m. | November 3 | 18 |
| *California Total* | | | | *18* |
| | | ***Colorado*** | | |
| Craig, Colorado | Clarion Inn | 5:00–7:00 p.m. | November 8 | 39 |
| *Colorado Total* | | | | *39* |
| | | ***Idaho*** | | |
| Idaho Falls, Idaho | Shilo Inn | 6:30–8:00 p.m. | November 6 | 70 |
| Marsing, Idaho | American Legion Hall | 6:30–8:00 p.m. | November 7 | 72 |
| Twin Falls, Idaho | Twin Falls District Office | 6:30–8:00 p.m. | November 2 | 17 |
| *Idaho Total* | | | | *159* |
| | | ***Montana*** | | |
| Billings, Montana | Montana-Dakotas State Office | 4:00–8:00 p.m. | November 8 | 36 |
| *Montana Total* | | | | *36* |

**Table 1-1**
**Scoping Open Houses in 2017**

| Location | Venue | | Date | Number of Attendees |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***Nevada*** | | | |
| Elko, Nevada | Elko Convention Center | 4:30–6:30 p.m. | November 8 | 40 |
| Ely, Nevada | Bristlecone Convention Center | 4:30–6:30 p.m. | November 9 | 23 |
| Sparks, Nevada | The Nugget | 4:30–6:30 p.m. | November 7 | 73 |
| *Nevada Total* | | | | *136* |
| | ***Oregon*** | | | |
| Burns, Oregon | Harney County Community Center | 5:00–8:00 p.m. | November 7 | 43 |
| *Oregon Total* | | | | *43* |
| | ***Utah*** | | | |
| Cedar City, Utah | Cedar City Festival Hall/Heritage Theatre | 5:00–7:00 p.m. | November 15 | 30 |
| Snowville, Utah | Snowville Elementary School | 5:00–7:00 p.m. | November 16 | 33 |
| Vernal, Utah | Western Park Convention Center | 5:00–7:00 p.m. | November 14 | 74 |
| *Utah Total* | | | | *137* |
| | ***Wyoming*** | | | |
| Cheyenne, Wyoming | Little America Hotel and Conference Center | 4:00–7:00 p.m. | November 6 | 67 |
| Pinedale, Wyoming | Pinedale Field Office | 4:00–7:00 p.m. | November 8 | 42 |
| *Wyoming Total* | | | | *109* |
| | ***Dakotas*** | | | |
| None | | | | |
| **Region Total** | | | | **677** |

Scoping meetings were held in an open house format to encourage participants to discuss concerns and questions with the BLM and other agency representatives. Copies of scoping information, as well as blank scoping comment forms, were available at the meetings.

## 1.4 Method of Comment Collection and Analysis

All written submissions received on or before December 6, 2017, were evaluated and are documented in this scoping summary report.

The BLM received 1,041 unique written submissions during the public scoping period; these included 4,691 substantive comments. The most common format used for submissions was email; comments were also faxed, submitted at public scoping meeting or via the project website, were hand-delivered to the BLM, or were submitted via the US Postal Service.

In addition to unique submissions, campaigns from nonprofit organizations and individuals resulted in a large number of form letters. Letters that represented slight variations of the form letter without significant additional information were treated as form letters. In total, 80,031 form letter submissions were received, based on 17 different form letters. Each form letter was counted once as a single submission. **Table 1-2**, Form Letter Submissions, provides details of how many people submitted form letters associated with each entity.

**Table 1-2**
**Form Letter Submissions[1]**

| Entity[2] | Number of Submissions |
|---|---|
| California Wilderness Coalition | 13,346 |
| Center for Biological Diversity | 2,188 |
| Colorado Organization (Unknown) | 1,274 |
| EarthJustice, BLM Wild, and The Wilderness Society | 3,177 |
| Friends of Earth | 31,618 |
| Idaho Conservation League | 12 |
| League of Conservation Voters | 4,464 |
| National Audubon Society Letter #1 | 13 |
| National Audubon Society Letter #2 | 18,519 |
| Oregon Natural Desert Association | 470 |
| Pew Charitable Trusts[3] | 2,584 |
| Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership | 1,106 |
| Unknown | 963 |
| Unknown | 12 |
| Unknown | 21 |
| Unknown | 13 |
| Unknown | 224 |
| Wyoming Outdoor Council | 27 |
| **Total** | **80,031** |

[1]All numbers are approximate.
[2]Origin of form letters has not been confirmed with these entities. This represents information to the best of BLM's knowledge.
[3]This entity submitted different batches to BLM state offices based on submitters' locations.

In addition to form letters, some organizations submitted petitions. Petitions are letters with many signatures attached. In total, 5 petitions were received, with a total of 93,999 signatures. Each petition counted as a single submission. **Table 1-3**, Petition Submissions, provides details of how many people signed petitions with each entity.

**Table 1-3**
**Petition Submissions[1]**

| Entity[2] | Number of Signatures |
|---|---|
| EarthJustice | 17,201 |
| Endangered Species Coalition | 9,357 |
| Environmental Defense Fund | 57,403 |
| League of Conservation Voters | 3,987 |
| Sierra Club | 6,051 |
| **Total** | **93,999** |

[1]All numbers are approximate.
[2]Origin of form letters has not been confirmed with these entities. This represents information to the best of BLM's knowledge.

In all form letters and petitions, the commenters expressed a desire to leave Greater Sage-Grouse plans in place without amendment, or they expressed a desire to see additional protective management measures enacted.

It is important to note that analyzing identical comments as a group does not reduce the importance of the comment. The NEPA regulations on scoping are clear that the scoping process is not a vote, but an opportunity to "determine the scope and the significant issues to be analyzed in depth in the environmental impact statement" (40 CFR 1501.7(a)(2)) as well as to "identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review" (40 CFR 1501.7(a)(3)).

**Table 1-4**, below, provides information on the affiliation of commenters. Most comments were received by individuals (66.5 percent), followed by organizations (26.0 percent) and government representatives (7.5 percent).

**Table 1-4**
**Submissions by Affiliation[1]**

| Affiliation | Number of Submissions | Percentage of Total Submissions |
|---|---|---|
| Government (federal, state, tribal, and local) | 78 | 7.5 |
| Organizations (businesses and nonprofits) | 271 | 26.0 |
| Individuals | 692 | 66.5 |
| **Total** | **1,041** | **100** |

[1]Calculations do not include form letters or petition signatories. All numbers are approximate.

**Table 1-5**, below, provides information on the location of commenters. Most comments were received from those in the planning area (64.4 percent), with Wyoming having the most commenters from a state in the planning area (10.7 percent); 18.3 percent of commenters were from outside the planning area.

**Table 1-5**
**Submissions by Geographic Area[1]**

| Location | Number of Submissions | Percentage of Total Submissions |
|---|---|---|
| California | 64 | 6.1 |
| Colorado | 101 | 9.7 |
| Idaho | 79 | 7.6 |
| Nevada | 99 | 9.5 |
| Oregon | 78 | 7.5 |
| Wyoming | 112 | 10.7 |
| North Dakota | 4 | 0.4 |
| South Dakota | 3 | 0.3 |
| Utah | 55 | 5.3 |
| Montana | 76 | 7.3 |
| Outside of the planning area | 190 | 18.3 |
| Unknown | 180 | 17.3 |
| **Total** | **1,041** | **100** |

[1]Calculations do not include form letters or petition signatories. All numbers are approximate.

To ensure that public comments were properly registered and that none were overlooked, the BLM used a multiphase management and tracking system. Written submissions were given a unique identifier and were logged into the system. Each submission was then reviewed, and individual comments were extracted.

All comment letters are posted on the project website for public review.

# CHAPTER 2
# PLANNING PROCESS COMMENTS

This chapter summarizes the planning process comments received during the scoping period. For the number of submissions received and a breakdown of commenters, see **Section 1.4**, Method of Comment Collection and Analysis.

## 2.1 PLAN UPDATES

The commenters who specified whether plans should be updated fell into two categories: those who recommended that the BLM continue implementing the current plans or increase protections and those who felt the plans should be amended to allow more flexibility in management.

The commenters recommending amending the plans felt that there needs to be modifications only, to bring them more in line with state plans and programs, new science, and information. Most of these commenters, which primarily included state governors, state agencies, local governments, energy interests, and livestock grazing interests, expressed that the existing plans were overly restrictive; however, some, primarily form letter submissions and environmental interests, felt the plans needed to be amended to incorporate more of the protective measures outlined in the National Technical Team (NTT) Report (BLM 2011) and the Conservation Objectives Team Report (USFWS 2013).

Other commenters suggested that more substantial changes to the federal plans are needed to bring them into alignment with state plans. Some stated that the plans need to be rejected in whole.

## 2.2 PLANNING AREA AND DECISION SPACE

The public offered input on the process for amending the plans. Some commenters supported state-based plan adjustments, whether as amendments or as plan maintenance. While these commenters typically had similar issues with the current plans, they felt that the corrective actions should be specific to

each state or sub-region.[2] Some commenters said that the BLM should take a range-wide approach to updating plans. Finally, some commenters, primarily in form letter campaigns, stated that the BLM should continue to implement the current plans.

Commenters also offered general approaches to planning, such as whether to do an environmental assessment versus an EIS; others suggested that the document should be a "guidance" document rather than a "decision" document.

## 2.3 ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT CONSIDERATIONS

Some commenters discussed the potential listing of the Greater Sage-Grouse as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. All of these commenters recognized that it is in everyone's best interest to continue to manage the habitat for the species so as to prevent its listing. All state governors also expressed a desire to prevent listing the Greater Sage-Grouse. Ensuring that the species is not listed would continue to be the primary driver of any modifications to or clarifications of the plans.

With a state-by-state amendment approach, some commenters stated that it may be challenging to adequately capture range-wide impacts on Greater Sage-Grouse such that the USFWS can readily make a determination about the species' overall conservation condition.

[2]This report provides an overall summary of the types of comments received related to each issue. To see submissions in context, please see submissions posted on the project ePlanning website: https://goo.gl/2D5WTw.

# CHAPTER 3
# ISSUE STATEMENTS AND COMMENT SUMMARIES

Issue identification is the first step in the BLM planning process. As defined in the BLM Land Use Planning Handbook (H-1601-1) (BLM 2005), planning issues are concerns or controversies about existing and potential land and resource allocations, levels of resource use, production, and related management practices. They include, resource use, development, and protection opportunities to consider in preparing the resource management plan. The issues may stem from new information or changed circumstances and from the need to reassess the appropriate mix of allowable uses.

Comments from state governors, state agencies, local governments, and some interest groups expressed that the BLM should update the plans to be consistent with the plans implemented by each state. For example, commenters from some states noted inconsistencies between state plans and the BLM's plans. The specific inconsistencies pertained to mapping habitat management areas, allowable uses in management areas, mitigation, and adaptive management. These are further described below in the issue statements.

To see the full context of these and other comments, please see submissions posted on the project ePlanning website: https://goo.gl/2D5WTw.

## 3.1 Issues not Previously Analyzed in the 2015 Greater Sage-Grouse Plans or that May Warrant Additional Analyses

***Issue: Are the habitat designations identified in the ARMPAs[3] adequate, or are modifications needed to better reflect the needs of the species' habitat? Should additional flexibility be integrated into habitat designation to have the ability to adjust the boundaries of the management areas because of changing needs of the species without a land use plan amendment?***

*Comment Summary*

Some commenters stated the need for adjusting habitat management areas so that they conform with management areas identified by the states. This would provide consistency in management across jurisdictions and to third parties operating on public and state or private lands. Many of these same commenters requested that the BLM integrate flexibility into the plans to be able to adjust habitat management areas without the need for a LUPA.

Commenters suggested that habitat designations should be flexible so that the boundaries can be adjusted over time. On the other hand, some commenters stated that the habitat areas should be maintained, even if they are not currently used by Greater Sage-Grouse, because the species could use them in the future. Other commenters stated that habitat area designations need to be revised to include winter habitat.

Some commenters wrote that all habitat areas should be maintained as identified in the ARMPAs; this includes SFAs, which should be provided with the most protections.

Commenters in Utah stated that GHMA should be eliminated or portions of PHMA that are not habitat but could become so with treatment (opportunity areas) should be changed to GHMA, with associated management.

One commenter stated that the BLM should consider an alternative that does not have any Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management boundaries.

[3]For example, SFA, priority habitat management areas (PHMA), general habitat management areas (GHMA), other habitat management areas (Nevada and Northeast California), or opportunity areas (Utah), and important habitat management areas (Idaho)

***Issue: How does SFA designation, in the absence of a mineral withdrawal, contribute to achieving Greater Sage-Grouse conservation outcomes? How does SFA designation affect the potential for mineral development?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters suggested that the habitat area designations identified in the ARMPAs should be modified to remove the SFA designation, particularly in light of the agency's decision to cancel locatable mineral withdrawals within SFAs.

Some commenters stated that all habitat areas should be maintained as identified in the ARMPAs. This includes SFAs, which should be provided with the most protections.

***Issue: How do density caps on facilities affect energy and mineral development?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters state that density caps, particularly for locatable minerals, should not be included. This is because minerals need to be mined where they exist; they cannot be extracted directionally the same way as fluid minerals.

***Issue: How do lek buffers contribute to achieving Greater Sage-Grouse conservation outcomes? How do lek buffers affect energy development and other infrastructure development projects? How do topography and local environmental conditions affect the utility of uniform lek buffers for achieving Greater Sage-Grouse conservation outcomes?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters stated that protective lek buffers should be consistent with state plans.

Commenters stated that uniform lek buffer distances are not appropriate and should be applied based on the activity. Some commenters stated that there should be flexibility in lek buffer distances based on timing and type of activity.

Other commenters stated that maximum and consistent lek buffers are needed for all surface-disturbing activities to preserve Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

Commenters stated that the BLM should consider flexibility in lek buffers when topography is a natural barrier to disturbance.

***Issue: How would waivers, exceptions, and modifications to no surface occupancy (NSO) stipulations in PHMAs affect the achievement of Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives? How does oil and gas leasing affect the achievement of Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters wrote that the BLM should allow more waivers, exceptions, and modifications to NSO stipulations in PHMA. Colorado commenters also suggested that the BLM should change the restriction on new oil and gas leasing to an NSO stipulation within 1 mile of a lek.

***Issue: How would a federal approach to population-based management affect Greater Sage-Grouse?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters stated that the BLM should not consider population-based management of Greater Sage-Grouse, which could include captive breeding or population targets. These commenters favored habitat-based management, as generally outlined in the ARMPAs, but with modifications.

Some commenters felt that captive breeding could be used if desired by stakeholders and interest groups; moreover, the BLM should work with states, other federal agencies, and private partners to improve population estimates that would increase confidence in the use of a population metric.

## 3.2 Issues Previously Analyzed in the 2015 Greater Sage-Grouse Plans

***Issue: How do restrictions on rights-of-way (ROWs) and infrastructure for Greater Sage-Grouse conservation affect the maintenance of existing ROWs and facilities and the development of new ROWs and facilities?***

*Comment Summary*

Some commenters wrote that ROW restrictions were too restrictive. Commenters who suggested reducing ROW restrictions noted the need for recognizing valid existing rights. They also supported site-by-site ROW restrictions in specific conflict areas, rather than course boundaries applied on the landscape scale.

Other commenters wrote that the BLM should increase ROW restrictions to protect Greater Sage-Grouse and their habitat. Generally, commenters who supported the increased ROW restrictions recommended additional identification of ROW avoidance or exclusion areas and seasonal use limitations in PHMA and GHMA. They further state that blanket exemptions for large infrastructure projects that cut through Greater Sage-Grouse habitat are not compatible with Greater Sage-Grouse protection.

***Issue: What restrictions are needed for wind energy projects in PHMA to meet the conservation objectives for Greater Sage-Grouse?***

*Comment Summary*

In Wyoming, a commenter suggested that the BLM plans be amended to clarify that wind energy development will not be permitted in areas identified by the State of Wyoming as Core Areas. This would be in effect until the State has identified stipulations on wind energy development that avoid negative impacts on Greater Sage-Grouse. Other commenters suggested that PHMAs should be reclassified from avoidance areas to exclusion areas for wind energy development, to meet Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives.

***Issue: How does the policy of ROW avoidance in PHMA and GHMA affect the need for locating roadways and utilities on federal lands to access state and private inholdings in PHMA and GHMA?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters state that Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management makes it difficult to access state and private inholdings. A commenter suggests that consolidating federal lands would benefit Greater Sage-Grouse conservation. This is because it would reduce the need for roadways and utility lines on federal lands that are necessary to access and use the enclosed state and private lands.

***Issue: How does the policy of retaining lands identified as PHMA and GHMA in federal ownership affect the States' ability to exercise their rights to develop land or to select federal land in lieu of state trust lands that were reserved by the federal government at the time of statehood?***

*Comment Summary*

In Nevada and Wyoming, before the 2015 LUPs were in effect, lands had been identified for disposal or transfer. The 2015 LUPs made these lands unavailable for disposal. One commenter would like these lands to be available for disposal again. Also, the State of Utah claims the right to select federal land in lieu of state trust lands that were reserved by the federal government at the time of statehood under the Utah Statehood Act. The 2015 LUPs impair the State's ability to exercise this right. Commenters would like these lands to be available for transfer again.

White Pine County, Nevada, similarly argues that land designated through the White Pine County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2006 that was identified as Greater Sage-Grouse habitat would hamper planned future growth and anticipated economic development. The County states that it has already invested in the development of some of the lands identified through the 2006 Act.

***Issue: In Wyoming, do certain types or classes of activities affect Greater Sage-Grouse, including emergency responses, public health and safety issues, animal husbandry practices, community road maintenance, stock wells, irrigation development, and fence maintenance?***

*Comment Summary*

Some commenters suggested that certain types or classes of uses had a negligible or no impact (sometimes referred to as a "de minimis" impact) on Greater Sage-Grouse. Examples of such uses are emergency responses, public health and safety issues, animal husbandry practices, community road maintenance, stock wells, irrigation development, and fence maintenance. The commenters wrote that these uses should be exempt from stipulations, because they do not benefit the conservation of the species and they impose increased burdens on the occurrence of those activities.

Some commenters suggested that the occurrence of certain of uses may even be beneficial for achieving Greater Sage-Grouse conservation outcomes. Commenters further noted that exempting these uses would allow the BLM to prioritize its resources and efforts on activities that create a greater risk of negative impacts on Greater Sage-Grouse.

***Issue: Do differences between oil and gas and geothermal technology require that different stipulations be applied to these activities?***

*Comment Summary*

States with more geothermal potential than oil and gas potential are concerned that restrictions meant primarily for oil and gas would affect the more viable geothermal development in their state. States would like the flexibility for geothermal exploration through waivers, exemptions, modifications, required design features, conditions of approval, or mitigation. Commenters stated that geothermal extraction technology is different from oil and gas and therefore cannot be managed in the same manner; such restrictions could preclude the ability for geothermal to be explored.

***Issue: How do NSO stipulations affect Greater Sage-Grouse habitat on non-BLM land?***

*Comment Summary*

Some commenters suggested that the strict application of NSO stipulations on BLM-administered lands was pushing development onto nearby non-BLM-administered lands where there is a higher quality Greater Sage-Grouse habitat; therefore, these commenters suggested that greater flexibility to NSO stipulations be incorporated through increased use of waivers, exceptions, and modifications that consider Greater Sage-Grouse habitat quality on BLM-administered and non-BLM-administered lands. These commenters further

suggested that this potential was particularly acute in areas with heavily checker-boarded patterns of landownership.

Commenters in Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada suggested that the process for allowing an exception, waiver, or modification of an NSO should not require unanimous decision with the BLM and USFWS decision-makers. Some of these commenters did state that the USFWS should continue to play an advisory role in such decision-making.

***Issue: How would an established mitigation hierarchy for oil and gas development contribute to Greater Sage-Grouse conservation outcomes?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters in Wyoming stated that the BLM should be consistent with the State's plan. They said the BLM should implement a mitigation hierarchy of avoidance, minimization, and compensatory mitigation to add flexibility to the oil and gas leasing and development process.

***Issue: How does prioritization of fluid mineral leases outside of PHMA and GHMA contribute to Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters noted that prioritizing fluid mineral leasing outside of PHMA and GHMA could push development onto state or private land in Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. This could be high quality habitat, so the prioritization of fluid mineral leasing outside of PHMA and GHMA could be affecting quality habitat on non-federal land.

***Issue: Should specific numerical noise limitations be applied throughout all PHMA?***

*Comment Summary*
Some commenters stated that the noise restrictions applied in the 2015 LUPs are not based on science. They would like noise limits applied only if they have scientifically established effectiveness. Commenters also would like noise restrictions to be applied only in certain habitat designations, mainly in PHMA only or in verified important habitat, rather than throughout Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

One commenter suggested that the BLM rescind numerical noise limitations and require only that heavy equipment not be operated near a lek, from dusk to dawn, unless geography or wind reduces the noise impacts.

Other commenters state that noise impacts on Greater Sage-Grouse are documented in science, such as in the NTT and Conservation Objectives Team reports. Commenters would like noise limits to protect the Greater Sage-

Grouse from the noisy impacts of oil and gas development and off-road vehicle use.

***Issue: How do disturbance caps contribute to achieving Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*

Some commenters state that the current 3 percent disturbance cap has not been uniformly applied and therefore will not achieve conservation objectives. Commenters wrote that the 3 percent disturbance cap on SFAs is arbitrary and capricious and that the arrival at this calculation was subjective.

Other commenters argue the current disturbance caps are set at levels too high to conserve the Greater Sage-Grouse.

Commenters suggested that the BLM should clarify how these calculations were made and ensure the disturbance caps were founded in the best available science. The current disturbance thresholds ignore important distinctions, such as current habitat quality, disturbance type, and timing.

Some commenters recommend changes to disturbances caps; however, they said that the BLM should consider changes only where credible, site-specific, scientific data demonstrate that modifications could be made without negatively affecting habitat use, nest success, juvenile survival, or the population growth rate of local Greater Sage-Grouse populations affected by development.

***Issue: How do required design features (RDFs) contribute to achieving Greater Sage-Grouse conservation outcomes? How do RDFs affect energy development and other infrastructure development projects?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters generally advocated for increased flexibility in the application of RDFs, pointing to cost increases and permitting delays. Some stated that RDFs should be voluntary or applied at the site-specific level, based on individual circumstances. This is because they are overly prescriptive at the LUP level.

Other commenters noted that certain RDFs are infeasible or have unintended negative consequences on Greater Sage-Grouse. Commenters stated that the BLM should modify the RDFs to require features only when the agency can document with science that the action would benefit the Greater Sage-Grouse.

One commenter expressed support for the current suite of RDFs and noted that the existing plans contain adaptive management allowing for the review of RDFs. The commenter is opposed to limiting RDFs to certain types of habitat.

Some commenters suggested that adjustments be made to specific RDFs to mitigate the negative impacts on other land uses. Commenters stated that the

BLM should clarify whether RDFs apply to all land uses or only to oil and gas development.

***Issue: How do disturbance caps, at the biologically significant unit or priority area for conservation levels, affect development at the site level?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters wrote that disturbance caps affect development. Examples given were how collocating infrastructure projects to avoid disturbance caps is not always possible, such as for high voltage power lines. The BLM should instead consider the concept of paralleling projects in disturbed areas. It also should consider removing the disturbance caps or clarifying that they do not apply to locatable minerals-related disturbances. Disturbance caps should be site-specific, rather than blanket.

Some commenters requested that disturbance and density caps do not apply to private lands,[4] which could result in a rush to develop private lands and a missed opportunity for royalty payments to the government from developing federal lands. Commenters said disturbance caps should be extended when disturbance cannot be avoided due to valid existing rights.

Commenters argue that because disturbance caps constitute substantive rules, proposed measures for implementing plans with disturbance caps would be subject to public notice and comment through the Administrative Procedures Act.

Some commenters support current disturbance caps as they are written. They recommend maintaining or reducing current oil and gas infrastructure density and strengthening avoidance and protection measures.

***Issue: How can habitat objectives be modified based on localized condition in each subregion, while contributing to range-wide conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters stated that the range-wide habitat objectives do not reflect those for localized habitat and that the objectives are unattainable in many locations across the range. Commenters suggested that instead of mandatory objectives, the objectives contained in Tables 2-2 and 2-3 of the ARMPAs should be goals or guidelines, with the understanding that they may not be achieved everywhere.

[4]Disturbance and density caps may apply to private lands in Montana and Wyoming, if a state permit is required for the activity on private lands.

Other commenters stated that the application of Tables 2-2 and 2-3 should be clarified through plan maintenance but that the overall objectives are based in sound science and should be applied range-wide.

***Issue: How do the habitat objectives for Greater Sage-Grouse affect livestock grazing?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters stated that the habitat objectives elevate livestock grazing to a primary threat when the USFWS identified livestock grazing as a secondary threat to Greater Sage-Grouse. Without having identified livestock grazing as a cause of the failure to meet the habitat objectives, reducing livestock grazing based on this is unfounded.

In Idaho, commenters stated that the trigger identified for reducing animal unit months by 50 percent is arbitrary and should be reevaluated.

Other commenters noted that livestock grazing can be used to enhance Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

***Issue: Are habitat objectives an effective or appropriate mechanism for managing livestock grazing or are other methods (e.g., rangeland health standards) sufficient to achieve Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters stated that rangeland health standards are the appropriate mechanism for managing livestock grazing and that the ranching industry is unfairly punished by having to meet both rangeland health standards and Greater Sage-Grouse habitat objectives. Further, because livestock grazing is a secondary threat to Greater Sage-Grouse, it should not be held to multiple standards.

***Issue: How do restrictions on range improvements and grazing systems for the purposes of meeting Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives affect the ability to meet rangeland health standards?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters stated that restrictions on such things as the construction of facilities (such as fences, windmills, and water tanks), minimum grass height, and off-road vehicle use can preclude livestock grazing permittees from achieving rangeland health standards or habitat objectives. This could lead to a decline in Greater Sage-Grouse habitat and a reduction in animal unit months, based on management guidance in the current plans. Allowances for range improvements to improve land health would also improve Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

***Issue: How should wildfire response be prioritized in Greater Sage-Grouse habitat? Also, what methods, including vegetation treatments and vegetation types, should be prioritized or prohibited to support fire management and fire response?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters ask that any amendments to the plans address fire suppression and related range management. This is because rangeland fires have increased in size, frequency, and severity in recent years. They acknowledge wildfire as a serious threat to habitat in the Great Basin and ask that the BLM focus on pre-suppression treatments, fuels management, rehabilitation and restoration, and the real threat of invasive species and noxious weeds.

Commenters ask that approaches to fire management be justified. Fire management should be supported by science and with a full assessment of the operational and risk management context in which these fire suppression methods would be applied.

Commenters state that uncontrolled severe fires negatively affect Greater Sage-Grouse habitat, because sagebrush recovers slowly from fire. Fire, both wild and prescribed, is considered a significant contributor to Greater Sage-Grouse habitat loss. The BLM should put more effort into controlled, smaller intensity fires to prevent fuel loading.

Some commenters disapprove of using bio-pesticides and herbicides to chemically treat burned areas to prevent invasive species and weed growth. They instead advocate for less ground disturbance in burned areas to promote the natural recovery of native species. Other commenters recommend specific herbicides be developed to treat and prevent cheatgrass and other invasive species in the burn.

Commenters recommend that a cooperative program be established between the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and the Desert Research Institute to study ways to reduce fire occurrence in priority habitat. They encourage the BLM to consider the Department of Agriculture's Safe Acres Grass Program as an example to prevent fuel loading on grasslands.

Commenters argue the importance in livestock grazing as a fire prevention method that reduces fuel loads and maintains Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. They advocate for livestock grazing to be used as an emergency measure to reduce fuel loads for the 2018 and 2019 wildfire season.

Other commenters assert that livestock grazing is ineffective for controlling cheatgrass, even at the highest levels of grazing intensity; livestock cannot be concentrated enough to effectively reduce fuel loads for wildfire suppression, and burned areas should be rested from livestock grazing to prevent the spread of nonnative vegetation.

Commenters state that prescribed fire is not adequately addressed in the current plans and that it should not be used as a vegetation treatment in Greater Sage-Grouse habitats with less than 12 inches of annual precipitation. Commenters cite that restoration actions in burned areas did not increase the probability of the area meeting sagebrush guidelines for breeding habitat.

***Issue: How should the BLM manage predators to meet Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters stated that the RDF for perch deterrents and restrictions on prohibiting raptor nest platforms be removed from the ARMPAs and instead to allow for flexibility in management. Some commenters oppose predator control altogether. Commenters stated that the BLM should partner with agencies with jurisdiction in proactive predator control programs. Commenters stated that the BLM should evaluate how improved Greater Sage-Grouse habitat, particularly grass height and canopy cover, can provide concealment from predators. Commenters suggested that the BLM examine habitat modifications that would discourage predation.

***Issue: How should wild horses and burros be managed to meet Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*

This issue was raised primarily in Nevada. Commenters stated that the BLM should ensure that wild horse and burro populations are within appropriate management levels in areas where herd management overlaps Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management areas.

Commenters stated that wild horses and burros do not affect Greater Sage-Grouse as much as livestock and, therefore, Greater Sage-Grouse management should not pertain to wild horses and burros. Other commenters from Nevada stated the opposite, that wild horses and burros are causing a greater impact on Greater Sage-Grouse habitat than livestock.

***Issue: Can the adaptive management plan be clarified to more clearly assess causal factors for reaching a trigger, so that the appropriate threat is addressed, and still meet Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters suggested that the BLM include a method to identify the causal factor for reaching a trigger and tie it to the threat to Greater Sage-Grouse. This way, appropriate action can be taken. Other commenters stated that the BLM should use caution in this approach because causal factor analysis can lead to delays in implementing change in management. This could result in additional impacts on Greater Sage-Grouse habitat in the interim.

***Issue: Can the adaptive management plan be modified to allow for a reversal of change management when conditions warrant?***

*Comment Summary*
While some commenters stated that hard triggers should not be more flexible to maintain habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse, other commenters stated that there should be more flexibility in the adaptive management plan, particularly related to reversing change in management. These commenters suggested that there be a mechanism that identifies when conditions are deemed adequate to meet Greater Sage-Grouse objectives and that allows for previous management or activities to resume.

***Issue: Is the habitat assessment framework the appropriate method for assessing habitat conditions, or are there existing mechanisms that would achieve Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters stated that the BLM should consider methods to assess habitat suitability other than the habitat assessment framework (HAF) presented in the 2015 LUPs. Examples of alternatives are state-developed habitat quantification tools, rangeland health assessments, and transition models. Commenters disagreed with the use of grass stubble height in the HAF and would like other factors, such as temperature, precipitation, and soil makeup, to be considered.

Commenters also would like habitat objectives removed or unhitched from permit renewal and other land uses. They stated that objectives should be aspirational or "ideals," but they recognize that most public land sites are not ideal. Other commenters agreed with the HAF method, or suggested clarifying the approach by, for example, clarifying the use of the HAF for all resource decisions, not just livestock grazing, and adding site capability analysis, and ensuring consistent application across the range. Some commenters were confused about the differences between assessment, inventory, and monitoring (AIM) strategy and the HAF, and how to apply them.

***Issue: How do mitigation standards affect Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives?***

*Comment Summary*
Commenters suggested a range of mitigation goals to achieve Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives. Some commenters would like the net conservation gain and no net loss objectives from the 2015 LUPs retained; others say these, and other mitigation, are overreaching and perhaps unlawful, because policy has changed since the 2015 LUPs.

Changes suggested for mitigation range-wide included eliminating compensatory mitigation requirements in GHMA and PHMA when Executive Order thresholds are not exceeded and consistency with the 2016 Mitigation Report by the

Greater Sage-Grouse Task Force. Commenters would like the BLM to assess whether the States' plans for mitigation could adequately address the threats in the area, avoid habitat loss or fragmentation, and ensure effective and durable conservation, while providing economic development. Commenters reiterated consistency with or deference to State plans regarding mitigation; some commenters would like State mitigation programs adopted, as long as certain objectives are met, such as having achievable, measurable outcomes, focusing on habitat function, and being based in science.

In Oregon, commenters stated that the BLM should not modify the mitigation standards or hierarchy. This is because it would add uncertainty to development, and the current BLM standard is already consistent with the State's action plan.

***Issue: How does Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management affect state and local socioeconomics?***

*Comment Summary*

Commenters had varying opinions on the impacts of habitat management on state and local economics. They stated that both Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management and loss of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat through limited or no management could reduce opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism. This would have negative socioeconomic impacts on state and local economies.

Commenters also stated that habitat management could have positive or negative impacts on the livelihoods of ranchers. Those on one side state that preserving Greater Sage-Grouse habitat also preserves foraging areas for livestock; others state that habitat designations are diminishing the value of ranches, because PHMA designation limits ranchers' use of these lands.

Commenters state that habitat designations restrict activities so that these lands cannot be used for food, energy, and mineral development. This development is particularly important to states with natural resource-based economies.

Some commenters wrote that federal listing of the Greater Sage-Grouse would also have negative impacts on economies.

## 3.3 Data and Science

The BLM received 294 comments that were coded as data and science. These included peer reviewed articles, references, and requests for new studies. The BLM will review these comments and will consider information presented when determining if plan modifications are necessary.

## 3.4 Alternatives

Both the Utah and Idaho governors called for full consistency with their state plans. Other governors also identified the need for consistency to some degree with the state plans. No other commenters suggested a complete or stand-

alone alternative for the BLM to consider; however, some commenters did state that the BLM should follow the minimum guidance in the NTT Report (BLM 2011). Those commenters who recommended making changes to the plan tended to provide specific ideas, which are summarized above in the issue statements and summaries of comments.

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# CHAPTER 4
# PLANNING CRITERIA COMMENTS

Planning criteria establish constraints, guidelines, and standards for the planning process and help planners define the scope of the process and estimate the extent of data collection and analysis. Planning criteria are based on the following:

- Standards prescribed by applicable laws and regulations
- Agency guidance
- Results of consultation and coordination with the public, other federal, state, and local agencies, and Indian tribes
- Analysis of information pertinent to the planning area
- Professional judgment

Plan amendments, if needed, will comply with the FLPMA, NEPA, the National Forest Management Act of 1976, and all other applicable laws, regulations, and policies. Impacts from the management alternatives considered in the LUPAs, if needed, will be analyzed in EISs developed in accordance with regulations at 43 CFR 1610 and 40 CFR 1500.

***Planning Criteria Comment Summary***

Some commenters offered input on how to formulate planning criteria for the LUPA process. Some reiterated or expanded on the planning criteria of the 2015 Greater Sage-Grouse planning process. Included among these were requests to adhere to legal obligations, existing policies, and standards, such as the following:

- 2000 and 2006 National Defense Authorization Acts (for Utah)
- Information Quality Act of 2000

- The 2004 Office of Management and Budget's Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review
- Executive Orders 13777 (Enforcing the Regulatory Reform Agenda,) 13790 (Promoting Agriculture and Rural Prosperity in America,) and 13783 (Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth)
- BLM Manual 6840, Special Status Species Management
- USFWS Conservation Objectives Team Report (USFWS 2013)
- BLM NTT Report (BLM 2011)
- Mining and Mineral Policy Act of 1970
- FLPMA
- Secretarial orders, including 3353 (Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation and Cooperation with Western States) and 3349 (American Energy Independence)
- NEPA
- Administrative Procedure Act of 1946
- Council on Environmental Policy regulations for implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1500 et seq.)
- 2016 Compensatory Mitigation Report for the Greater Sage-Grouse Task Force[5]
- Consistency with state Greater Sage-Grouse conservation plans

Specific planning criteria offered by commenters was as follows:

- Plan for wildlife and other natural resources at ecologically appropriate scales
- Identify goals and objectives to guide planning and development of mitigation strategies to meet the purpose and need for the planning process
- Provide a linked sequence of measurable objectives for goals, land use prescriptions, actions taken to resolve identified issues, and adaptive management
- Require that plan implementation include both agency and independent verification through collaborative effectiveness monitoring and evaluation (BLM Handbooks H-1601-1 [BLM 2005] and H-4180-1 [BLM 2001])
- Ensure that management prescriptions do not cause "unnecessary or undue degradation of the lands" (43 United States Code 1732(b))

[5]Report submitted to the Greater Sage-Grouse Task Force in December 2016; available on request from the BLM.

- Determine whether the preferred alternatives are achievable under current and foreseeable agency resources
- Recognize valid existing rights

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# CHAPTER 5
# FUTURE STEPS

## 5.1 FUTURE STEPS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES

Using the information and comments collected during the scoping process, the BLM will determine the need for LUPAs in a given state and BLM state office. If one or more amendments are necessary, the BLM will determine if a state or national amendment approach should be applied. The BLM will also consider whether issues could be resolved through policy guidance (e.g., instruction memoranda) or plan maintenance. The agency will comply with NEPA, the Council on Environmental Quality regulations, and its own planning regulations and guidance.

All publications, including this report, newsletters, Notices of Intent, Notices of Availability, and other subsequent documents, will be published on the project website at https://goo.gl/2D5WTw. In addition, pertinent dates regarding public review periods of any documents and solicitation of public comments will be published on the website.

## 5.2 CONTACT INFORMATION

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# CHAPTER 6
# REFERENCES

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